



Western States Water

Addressing Water Needs and Strategies for a Sustainable Future

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ADMINISTRATION/CONGRESS **Senate Confirmation Hearings**

On February 3, the Senate confirmed Chris Wright as Secretary of Energy by a 59-38 vote, with seven Democrats and one Independent in support. Wright said: "The President has outlined a bold and ambitious agenda for restoring American energy dominance. A key component of this vision is the United States leading the world in energy development and innovation.... When American energy is unleashed, human lives are bettered. I look forward to serving."

On January 31, Doug Burgum was sworn in as the 55th Secretary of the Interior. The Senate confirmed the former North Dakota governor by a vote of 79-18, with large bipartisan support. Burgum said: "Grateful to President Trump for the honor to serve as Secretary of the Interior.... We will achieve Energy Dominance by sustainably developing our natural resources while championing clean air and clean water, protecting our most beautiful lands, and expanding outdoor recreation!"

On January 29, Lee Zeldin was confirmed and sworn in as Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The Senate voted in Zeldin's favor 56-42, with all 53 Republicans and three Democrats backing him. Zeldin said: "It is my honor to serve as the 17th Environmental Protection Agency Administrator.... We will maintain and expand the gold standard of environmental stewardship and conservation that President Trump set forth in his first administration while also prioritizing economic prosperity."

ADMINISTRATION/WATER RESOURCES **NOAA/NIDIS/Drought**

On February 5, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) National Integrated Drought Information System (NIDIS) released a new Snow Drought Update. In January, a stationary high pressure system in the northeastern Pacific Ocean, caused snow deficits and the development of snow drought throughout western basins, which saw 30-day precipitation between 0% and 50% of average. Some Snow Telemetry (SNOTEL) sites in the Southwest

reported record low snow water equivalent (SWE). In Arizona, the Verde Basin is at 10% of normal SWE, the Little Colorado Basin is at 17%, and the Salt River Basin is at 6%. Conditions are slightly better in New Mexico with the Upper Rio Grande Basin at 44% of normal, Rio Grande-Elephant Butte Basin at 24%, and Upper Canadian Basin at 53%. However, when broken down to the sub-basin level, 7 out of the 15 sub-basins within New Mexico are below 25% of normal. Much of Oregon and Washington received significantly below-normal precipitation in January, with extreme dryness prevalent over most of the Washington Cascade Range and Olympic Mountains. The Puget Sound Basin reported the lowest SWE in the region at 76% of normal, and the Upper Columbia Basin is currently at 80% of normal. Lower elevation snow drought developed across Alaska due to record-breaking temperatures and precipitation falling as rain.

Many SNOTEL stations in the Northern Rocky Mountains, particularly in western Montana, reported SWE below the 20th percentile. Snowpack in Utah was generally below normal, with extreme snow drought conditions in the southern part of the State. Record high temperatures eliminated low and mid-elevation snowpack statewide.

January was exceptionally dry in California and Nevada, with much of the region receiving less than 25% of normal precipitation. Snowpack in most of the Sierra Nevada and the mountains of southern Nevada fell to below normal. California Department of Water Resources (DWR) snow pillows reported 101%, 64%, and 46% of normal SWE for the northern, central, and southern regions of California, respectively. On the east side of the Sierra Nevada, SNOTEL stations reported 65%, 64%, and 60% of normal SWE for the Truckee, Carson, and Walker Basins, respectively.

WATER RESOURCES **California/Army Corps Dam Releases**

On January 31, a coalition of Tulare County water districts issued a combined statement on releases made by the Army Corps of Engineers from Lake Kaweah and Lake Success per a January 24 presidential executive

order which mandated federal officials exert all efforts to get more water to southern California to fight wildfires (WSW #2646). The statement explained that Kaweah River and Tule River waterways are not connected to the ocean or California aqueduct, which serves the Southern San Joaquin Valley and Southern California where the wildfires occurred and are largely contained. It also clarified that the water in both reservoirs was stored under pre-1914 water rights, managed in cooperation with the Corps to achieve the combined benefits of both flood control and water supply. The statement read: "CA's water operations are incredibly complex. The movement of water supplies requires an extensive understanding of the plumbing, safety concerns, laws, and coordination among the various owners and operators of water and canals...."

An hour prior to the releases, the Army Corps of Engineers gave Tulare County water managers notice that they would open Lake Kaweah and Lake Success dams to release water at channel capacity. The local irrigation districts have storage rights in the Army Corps reservoirs, which are reduced during the winter to leave space for flood management during wet-season precipitation. In dry years, water districts are often allowed to "encroach" on flood control space and store more water than the normal winter allowances. Prior to the releases, Success Lake held about 5,000 acre-feet (AF) of encroachment water, while Lake Kaweah held 39,000 AF. Concerned about both local flood risk and loss of future water supply, water managers requested the Corps reduce the amount of the releases. The Corps agreed, releasing only 2,500 AF of Success Lake's encroachment water, and 4,200 AF of Lake Kaweah's encroachment water. Some of the released water was used for irrigation while most was used for groundwater recharge. Pine Flat and Isabella dams weren't included in the releases as water levels had not encroached into flood control space.

Local water districts expressed their concerns. Kaweah Delta Water Conservation District board member Brian Watte said: "In the big picture, the amount of water was not huge. It was the process." Don Mills, board president, said: "This event showed a real disconnect between some agencies and the lack of taking input from the locals who know how to manage the water." Aaron Fakuda, General Manager of the Tulare Irrigation District, said: "We were on the phone nonstop, pushing this issue from both angles of Sacramento and D.C.... Luckily, we minimized it. It came down to Friant. They don't manage local water, but they were with us in it, trying to get through to the right people." The Friant Water Authority manages the federally-owned Friant-Kern Canal, separate from the Success and Kaweah Systems. Johnny Amaral, Friant's chief operating officer said: "A new administration means

there are new opportunities but it also means there is a lot of work to do." On January 27, Friant issued a press release, commending President Trump's focus on California water operations. *SJV Water 02/05/25*.

On January 31, Senator Alex Padilla (D-CA) wrote a follow up letter to Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth. He wrote: "Unscheduled water releases require close coordination with local officials and safety personnel, as well as downstream agricultural water users, in order to reduce flood risks to communities and farms. Based on the urgent concerns I have heard from my constituents, as well as recent reporting, it appears that gravely insufficient notification was given, recklessly endangering residents downstream. Therefore, I ask that you respond in writing to the following questions: (1) Who directed that these releases be made?; (2) If the purpose of these releases is to help fight wildfires in Los Angeles County (which are already almost fully contained), what is the plan to transport this water to Los Angeles rather than let the water simply be discharged into Tulare Lake where it will evaporate?; (3) What type of notification, and how much advanced notice, was given to irrigation districts and public safety personnel to prepare for these increased flows?; (4) What impact will these releases have on Tulare Lake communities, including private landowners?"

PEOPLE

Andrea Travnicek was nominated as Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Water and Science, resigning her position as Director of the North Dakota Department of Water Resources (DWR). Travnicek was appointed to the WSWC in 2016 when she was serving as Senior Policy Advisor to then-North Dakota Governor Doug Burgum. She served in the first Trump Administration as Deputy Assistant Secretary for Water and Science. Returning to North Dakota, she was appointed as DWR Director in August 2021, and served WSWC as the Water Resources Committee Chair. She said: "It has been an honor to be a part of [WSWC] again, especially serving as a director to a state agency and having the opportunity to lead one of the committees."

Emma Pokon was appointed as EPA's new Region 10 Administrator. Previously, Pokon served as Commissioner for the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC). Pokon was appointed to the WSWC in 2022 by Governor Mike Dunleavy. She said: "I'm grateful for the opportunity to continue public service in this new role and look forward to working with EPA leadership and Region 10 to ensure balanced implementation of the nation's environmental laws." Deputy Commissioner **Christina Carpenter** will serve as acting commissioner pending the governor's selection of a new commissioner.

The WESTERN STATES WATER COUNCIL is a government entity of representatives appointed by the Governors of Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Dakota, Texas, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming.